ERIC Document Resume	See Instruction Sheet	DATE OF RESUME	DATE RECEIVED

A. PUBLICATION DATA

1. ERIC NUMBER	2. ORIGINATOR CONTROL NO(S).	3. IDENTIFICATION NO.
ED001656	N.A.	N.A.

DO NOT WRITE IN SPACE BELOW

4. AUTHOR(S):
Weinstein, Gerald and Fantini, Mario

5. TITLE OF DOCUMENT ABSTRACTED:
"Phoney" Literature

6. PUBLICATION TITLE:
N.A.

7. EDITOR(S):
N.A.

8. PLACE OF ORIGIN
ORG. Syracuse University
ST. Syracuse, New York
CITY, STATE

9. PUBLISHER OR SOURCE
Syracuse University
Syracuse, New York

10. VOL.	11. PAGES	12. MO./YR.	13. TOTAL PP.
N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	14

TELE. EXT.
INST/LOC CODE

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TYPE OF REPORT
PROPOSAL ☐
IN-PROGRESS ☐
FINAL ☒
FOLLOW-UP ☐

OTHER ERIC REFERENCES:

ERIC SATELLITE CODE

B. INDEXING DATA

14. SUBJECT AREA

15. TYPE OF ENDEAVOR
sample curricula

16. INDEXING TERMS (6-12)
Madison Area Project, Syracuse, New York
language arts
literature
teaching techniques
classroom interaction
secondary education
teacher training
culturally disadvantaged
curriculum development

17. ABSTRACT (MAX. 250 WORDS)

Ninth grade students refused to read their literature assignments because they considered them to be "phoney." After conversations with the teacher, the children established some literary criteria: "phoniness" referred to one-dimensional characters, unbelievable situations and dialogue. The children were permitted to evaluate new books which came into the school. They responded to the new activity with enthusiasm.

Since literature developed for the disadvantaged is difficult to find, teachers are encouraged to develop their own curricula. One technique is to have a child verbalize his impressions of a trip and record it on tape.

A sample essay entitled, "Rotation Pool" was written by a child about his city activities. The essay was dittoed and distributed to the class. They read it, and a test was given. Questions for discussion are given.

ERIC No.

18. SOURCE OF ABSTRACT

C. FUNDING DATA

19. SUPPORTING ORGANIZATION	20. DIVISION OR DEPT.	21. CONTRACT NO. / PROJECT NO.
	22. TOTAL COST OF PROJECT	
	23. DURATION OF PROJECT	U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare Office of Education

ERIC Form 1

000477

HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
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CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS 02138

ED001656

"PHONEY" LITERATURE

By Gerald Weinstein and
Mario Fantini

A nine year old girl . . . .
"Oh, dear! cried Holly. "What shall
we do? I wish Mother were home."

An eight year old boy (extremely annoyed) . . .
"This is grand," he said to himself.
"I certainly picked a perfect place to concentrate."

"It was a gray summer afternoon. Garnet and her friend Citronella were sitting on Garnet's porch, wondering what to do."

A group of 9th grade boys refused to read in English class. When asked why, they unanimously concurred that the books we were giving them were "phoney." What follows is the dialogue.

Teacher: What do you mean "phoney"?

Class: Corny

Teacher: What does "corny" mean?

Class: (no response)

Teacher: Can you give me an example of what isn't "corny"? Say in a T.V. program perhaps?

Class: "Naked City".

Teacher: Why isn't "Naked City" corny or phoney?

Class: Well, one Sunday you see a kid with his mother walking

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Weinstein – Syracuse –

to church and the next day he gets into trouble.

Teacher: Why isn't that phoney?

Class: Because he isn't all bad or all good. He isn't one-way.

Teacher: Are you saying then, that a one-way character is phoney?

Class: Yeah!

(Teacher writes "phoney" on the blackboard and under it "one-way character".)

Class: If you'd give the kids in this school the choice, they'd all read comic books.

Teacher: Why?

Class: They're a lot more fun.

Teacher: But I though you said one-way characters were "phoney"? I never heard of the Batman doing anything nasty.

Class: The big difference is we know the comic books are going to be phoney and that's why they're fun. But the stuff you give us in school you tell us isn't phoney and it always is.

Teacher: I see....What else do you see on T.V. that you don't think is phoney?

Class: "Divorce Court".[1]

Teacher: Why isn't that phoney?

---

[1] This is a program in which actors, to a great extent, improvise their lines.

Class: We don't know, it's just that they talk like real people. That's the thing about school books, they're not about life like we know it.

Teacher: Would you agree then that another thing that makes books phoney is the fact that the characters and events, or things that happen, aren't really believable to you?

Class: Yeah!

("Unbelievable" talk and "events" are written on the blackboard)

Teacher: Suppose there was a science fiction story about a man traveling to Mars. Would that be phoney?

(Some disagreement here by the class)

Class: It wouldn't have to be if the guy really acted like someone would act if he were really going.

Teacher: So you're saying that the situation wouldn't have to be real if the persons in it were acting in a believable way?

(Agreement)

At this point, some literary criteria---albeit simplified--was established by the pupils: "phoniness" meant one dimensional characters, unbievable situations and dialogue. The question remained how might we use this to carry the pupils a step further? This is what happened. The pupils were asked if they would be interested in evaluating (on their own terms) some of the new books that were sent to the school by

various publishers, so that it would give the school a better idea of what they might order. The class agreed to try it. Soon afterwards, selections from some of the new books were read to them. It was their job to decide whether or not the selections were phoney. They attacked each book with seeming pleasure. Was the main character one-way? Was he behaving in a believable manner? These were the topics for discussion.

The pupils began to disagree with one another. Each time disagreement was expressed, they were asked to quote from a specific passage to support their opinions. True, their language wasn't the most sophisticated but ideas came forth that were intriguing. It was quite possible for them now to listen, and in some cases, read the most mundane of school literature because they enjoyed tearing it apart.

We felt it was a good beginning.

WHAT KIND OF MATERIAL ARE CHILDREN BEING EXPOSED TO IN SCHOOL?

Why is it that these pupils became hostile toward phoniness whereas middle-class children have been taking this kind of material in their stride? A possible explanation may be that these children are much more worldly-wise than most of the sheltered middle-class. Life is no "Crystal Stairway", it isn't sugar-coated, it hasn't been screened for them. And yet, most of the conventional school literature is sugar-coated. The contrast is just too great for them to accept. School has communicated to them in many ways that they don't really belong, and phoney literature is just another way of reinforcing this.

Imagine a deprived child who may, if he is lucky, be living with both of his parents (but more likely he is not). His skin is dark. He lives in a crowded area with perhaps four or five brothers and sisters. The heads of the household usually work or may be on welfare. The everyday battle is to provide for the basic every-day needs.
And so he comes to school. His well-dressed teacher in kindly tones, says, "Open your English workbooks to page one, children. Read the story very carefully to yourselves and then answer the questions at the end."

And so the books are opened. The selection begins:

> Does everyone in your family have a different idea of where to go for a vacation?
>
> A vacation on the sea coast will make everyone happy.
>
> There are thrills and fun for all the family in this wonder-land of golden sun and silver sand.
>
> Dad will find deep-sea fishing, sailing and other he-man sports.
>
> Mother can visit the exciting shops and take the guided sightseeing trips. Or she can take sun baths on the beach (etc).

This selection was taken from a very widely used workbook. What kind of contact does it make with a disadvantaged pupil? How deeply involved can he become? Or take for example another illustration from the same book. This is supposedly a conversation between two ten year old boys:

> "I hope we don't have to wait much longer for the arrival of the school bus", said Sammy. "This icy wind is choking me!"

> "I'm convinced that the bus is stalled in a snowdrift somewhere up the valley", said his schoolmate, Phil. "It's fairly level along here, and the snow hasn't drifted. But on that curving mountain road it's a different story. Let's go home and get out of this bitter cold."
>
> "What you say may prove to be right, but I think we ought to wait a little bit longer", argued Sammy. "Don't you remember how the bus driver fought his way through the snow drifts last year?"

Ironically the title on this page of selections is "Where Could This Happen?" And that's my question. Where could you find two ten year olds who speak like that? Even in ordinary circumstances it would sound unreal, let alone in the predicament they were in.

The middle-class child comes from a value system which helps him adjust to, and take in his stride, innocuous literature. But, to the disadvantaged child, that last episode illustrates the height of "phoniness".

How is family-life depicted in the common basic readers used throughout the country? Always white, intact, loving, rarely having over four members, suburban home, and daddy with a brief-case. This is too often the case. The most severe family crisis arises when Spot, the terrier, gets lost.

As Eyra Jack Keats,[2] author and artist of children's books sums it up:

> "If any group of people is to be pictured as always fashionably thin, with children who never misbehave, and all of them improbably perfect, we are denying a people's right to deal with reality and assume the very responsibilities for which they struggle".
>
> (The writer was not speaking primarily with the disadvantaged in mind!)

He continues. "Let us open the book covers, these long-shut doors,

> to new and wonderful, true and inspiring books for all children about all children -- the tall and short, fat and thin, dark and light, beautiful and homely."

WHERE TO GET MATERIALS

There seems to be very few published materials appropriate for disadvantaged youngsters. The few we have found are listed in the bibliography. With such limited choice, reading materials will have to be developed by the teacher.

Many sound teaching practices at the elementary level are dropped, unfortunately, as a child progresses throughout the grades. One of these is the experience chart or story in which children's experience are compiled by the teacher and used as reading lessons. For example, when children take a trip and communicate, upon their return, orally to the teacher concerning what they did, saw, and felt, the teacher writes these comments on the board or chart, and together with the class organizes it into an "experience story". Tape recorders, if used at this time, are crucial in developing listening and speaking skills as well as reading. If the children record their reactions to the trip directly on a tape, listen to it, decide whose comments were not clear, have the comments corrected, practice the corrections, then retape, these important skills could be developed. The story could then be written from the tape for reading practice.[3]

In the upper grades, one sure way to invite failure is to ask a 14 year old boy who reads at the third grade level to read a third grade book.

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[2]Saturday Review of Literature

"I ain't gonna read no baby book!", is a frequent reaction.

We have, however, seen experience stories for these older pupils work remarkably well. Here is an example of how some were introduced and used.

In this particular situation, Peace Corps trainees were observing the teacher. The teacher's lesson plan listed the following procedures:

a. Ask pupils to tell me about city activities.
b. Write these on the board (pupils responded with: football, baseball, pool, record playing, baby sitting, movies, etc.)
c. Tell pupils I'm going to give them a private secretary.
d. Ask pupils to take one city activity and tell me how it's done.
e. Pair each pupil with a Peace Corp trainee.
f. Have pupils dictate activity to Peace Corp trainee.

After class, some of the dictated material was selected for the next day. Here is one pupil's essay:

ROTATION POOL

Roy Neal

You can use two players. First you get the one ball in. After the one ball you get the two ball in, after the two, try to get the three ball--all in a row to fifteen.

After you get all the balls in, you count up the balls, like if you've got a three and a four ball, then you have seven. Then after you are through counting them, the one with the most points wins.

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[3](In fact, we have almost reached the conclusion that the language arts program for disadvantage children for the first two years of school should not emphasize reading but speaking and listening skills based on a variety of direct experiences. It is these skills that precede reading).

Like you are on the eight ball and knock the nine ball in by mistake, you spot the nine ball in the middle of the table. And after you get the eight ball in, you knock your nine ball in your pocket where the rest of the balls are.

You can have one up to six players. They put the eight ball on the spot and the first one to knock it in gets the first shot, or the one that won the last game gets the bust. The bust is when you have all the balls from one to fifteen and you bust and whatever ball goes in is your ball. When you miss, knock the wrong ball in, it's the other person's turn. Then after you've won the game, you have one or two more players to play.

The essay * was then dittoed and distributed to the class. Following is a portion from the lesson plan:

a. Ask the pupils if they've ever played pool. How many have? What kinds of pool are there? What do you have to know in order to be able to play pool? (Pupils mentioned number of players, rules, etc.)

b. Ask pupils to look for the answers to these questions as I read Roy Neal's essay on "Rotation Pool".

c. Read Roy Neal's paper.

d. Give pupils written test on Roy Neal's essay.

Here is the test.

HOW WELL DID YOU READ Roy Neal's essay?

Your Name _____

1. What is the type of pool Roy is describing?

2. DIRECTION: Circle the letter of the right answer.

According to Roy, the largest number of people who can play this game is:

A. two
B. four
C. six
D. As many as you want

3. DIRECTION: Underline the right answer.

The person who wins the game is the one:

A. who has hit the most balls in the pocket
B. who has the most balls at the end of the game
C. whose numbers on the balls add up to the highest number
D. who goes out first

4. DIRECTION: Circle the right sentence.

If you hit the wrong ball in the pocket:

A. you leave it in the pocket and then lose a turn
B. you have to put the ball back on the table and then you lose a turn
C. you put the ball back on the table and then you can continue to play
D. you leave it in the pocket and continue to play

5. What does it mean to "spot a ball"?

6. If the player before you has just shot at the four ball and missed it, what ball should you try to get in the pocket?

7. How many ways of deciding who will get the first shot does Roy mention?

8. According to Roy, what is one way of deciding who will get the first shot?

9. What is "the bust"?

10. How many balls do you play with in this game? Why?

. . . . . .

---

*For those of you who might be hesitant about using material such as this, you should be aware that pool rooms are well on the road to respectability. Many have opened for the entire family.

Even if you, as a teacher, could develop on experience story a week, you could be making an important start. Offer yourself to be come pupils' secretary and have him dictate to you. Develop and reproduce it as the example was, and see what happens in terms of your pupil's motivation.

Are there any faculty members in your school, who have a flair for writing? We have found, that a writer's committee that could develop a series of vignettes can even be illustrated either by photographs or by drawings. They should make use of pupil language and experience patterns.

Here is an example:

THE DANCE

Jimmy had spent about an hour in front of the mirror getting ready for this dance. He was wearing his best suit, a smart three-buttoned slim job. Even so, he still didn't feel right. He was kind of jumpy.

The auditorium wasn't too crowded but Mary Ann was there. She looked real great with that pink lace dress and those pink high-heels.

All of the boys were standing together at one end and the girls were at the other.

"Hey, Jimmy!" Frank shouted, "You're looking pretty cool. Why don't you grab a chick and start swinging?"

"I would man, but I don't want to wear out my dancin' shoes."

"Well why do you have dancin' shoes if you're not going to use them?"

"Look who's talking, I don't see you spinning around the floor with anyone."

"Oh man, I wouldn't waste my time with any of these babes. They're from nowhere."

"Sure, sure, I know."

All the while he was talking, Jimmy kept watching Mary Ann out of the corner of his eyes. She was dancing with another girl.

The boys were still gathered in one corner, laughing and shouting wise remarks to the girls across the floor. Not one was dancing with a girl.

"If I only had enough guts to ask her to dance," Jimmy said to himself. "But it would be real rough. I'd have to walk across that big floor with everybody looking bug-eyed at me. The guys would sure make some fuss about it. And then suppose she didn't want to dance with me after I asked her? I'd feel so low-down I'd have to crawl out of here. Darn, I don't know what to do!"

He thought of himself dancing with her...holding her real close in his arms. He became more shakey than ever.

"Maybe," he thought, "if I just walked over real cool and said, 'let's dance baby,' she wouldn't have a chance to say no."

Before he had a chance to move, Tommy and Neil grabbed him by the arms. They pulled him over to the rest of the boys.

"C'mon Jimmy, we're all going over to Marshall St...This thing here is just too square man."

Jimmy found himself strolling out of the school with the boys. "Whew," he told himself, "where am I going? I didn't get all dressed up just to hang on the corner. But...I guess I can't go back now. Mary Ann...your're a doll. Well.....maybe next time."

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Why didn't Jimmy dance with Mary Ann?

If Jimmy wanted to stay at the dance, why did he leave with the boys?

Do you believe that Frank really didn't want to waste his time with the girls?

Where do you think this dance took place? In an Elementary, Junior High or High School? Why?

Do you think Jimmy will dance with Mary Ann next time? Why?

VOCABULARY ENRICHMENT

Find synonyms for the following:

cool -- 2 uses in story (nonchalant, indifferent, calm)
(fine, smart as in "looking cool")

square

Have class decide whether conversation was <u>formal</u> or <u>informal</u>. How could conversation be written in formal language.

Have class write about same situation written from Mary Ann's or Frank's point of view.

Have class stop at the end of line "she wouldn't have a chance to say "no", and predict ending.